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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Kyrgyzstan: Attacks Spread Fear Among Journalists

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the past month, four journalists have been attacked in Kyrgyzstan. Opposition newspapers and the public speculate that the attacks were intended to intimidate the press in the run-up to the March 27 opposition protests and early presidential elections this year. One paper, "Litsa," announced its closure, while another, "Reporter Bishkek," publicly contemplated closure. Officials blame the attacks on criminals. END SUMMARY.

FOUR ATTACKS ON JOURNALIST IN CLOSE SUCCESSION

¶2. (SBU) On March 3, four unknown, armed men attacked Syrdak Abdyldaev, a political correspondent for the independent Russian-language paper, "Reporter Bishkek." (Reftel) Two individuals stabbed Abdyldaev twenty-one times in a way that was purposefully non-life-threatening, while two individuals broke his arms, resulting in open fractures in both arms. The most popular analysis of the attack by journalists, opposition politicians, and the general public was that the attack was ordered by the authorities to intimidate journalists.

¶3. (SBU) On March 7, a cameraman for the Osh TV Broadcasting Company, Bahodyr Kenjebaev, was attacked near the Jackpot bar in Osh. Osh TV Editor-in-Chief Halil Hudaibergenov alleged that the attack was intended to intimidate the cameraman, who reported on corruption, prostitution, and criminals. Other independent commentators claim this attack was most likely criminal in nature. The victim was hospitalized with severe brain concussion, facial edema, and multiple bruises. A criminal investigation is underway.

¶4. (SBU) During the early morning hours of March 26, three unknown assailants attacked two journalists who print the Kyrgyz insert to the Moscow-based "Moskovsky Komsomolets" newspaper. The victims of the attack were Ulugbek Babakulov, a former human rights activist who was recently appointed as Editor-in-Chief; and reporter Elena Ageyeva, well-known for her column called "Letter to the President,"

in which she regularly mocks the authorities. The assailants stole a cell phone, 200 som (about 5 dollars), and a rain coat, prompting the Ministry of Internal Affairs spokesman to claim publicly that the attack was not related to the journalists' professional activities. However, many in the media community consider the attack to be either an attack on press freedom or an example of how local police have lost the ability to protect citizens from random violence.

MEDIA REACTION TO THE ATTACKS

15. (SBU) After he was beaten, Abdyldaev gave an interview to "Azattyk" radio, in which he said he had been followed for about one month prior to the attack. He said the attack was likely ordered and intended to injure him, rather than kill him. The editor-in-chief of Reporter, Turat Akimov, said that this is the second attack against his reporters and that he will likely have to shut down the newspaper.

16. (SBU) On March 12, the Russian-language opposition newspaper "Litsa" published an article called "Two of them cut me, two broke my bones: How to Kill a Journalist" under a column entitled Political Sadism. The newspaper quoted Abdyldaev as saying "They imprisoned us [journalists] during [former president] Akayev's rule. Now they're killing us. Who is attempting to intimidate us? To break us emotionally, to drive us into depression?" The newspaper editorialized that the attack was meant to "sow panic, fear in society, or more precisely, in the community of independent journalists and activists of individual parties."

17. (SBU) On March 18, "Moskovskiy Komsomolets-Kyrgyzstan" published an article called "Open Season on Journalists," which said, "The increased frequency of the attacks against journalists is a clear

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sign of upcoming, important political events on the national scale. In the light of the civil protest meetings of the opposition, which are always illuminated in detail by the media, such attacks can be projected as a warning 'to hold one's tongue behind the teeth.' [. . .] Thus, the season for hunting journalists is open. Who issues licenses to hunters?"

18. (SBU) On March 26, the publisher and Editor-in-Chief of "Litsa," Bermet Bukasheva, commented on her decision to close the paper: "You have probably heard of psychological pressure. After the attack on Syrgak Abdyldaev, who wrote stories for "Litsa" too, we should take threats seriously. What upsets me the most is the indifferent reaction of the public. [People] just talked a little bit and forgot. I am not scared of anybody or anything. I am just disappointed by the dirty politics and public indifference."

OFFICIAL REACTION: ATTACKS NOT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

19. (SBU) On March 16, Minister of Internal Affairs Moldomusa Kongantiev said at his press conference that even if Abdyldaev was attacked for the things he wrote, it was what he wrote about criminals -- not what he wrote about politics -- that provoked the attack. He said the attack was not connected to politics. The person who allegedly attacked Osh TV cameraman Kenjebaev has been arrested and charged with robbery and hooliganism. No more details or comments are available so far in the case of Ulugbek Babkulov and Elena Ageyeva.

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